

University Libraries Section at Midwinter

A wrap-up of activities

by Anne Garrison and Jennifer Evans

Public Service Directors at Large Research Libraries

The ACRL/ULS Public Service Directors at Large Research Libraries Discussion Group, chaired by Faye Backie, met at Midwinter to discuss the latest developments of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), lending laptops for student and staff use, and planning for a science library in the 21st century.

Mary Jackson of ARL updated the group on the various activities of the North American Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery Project (NAILDD). ARL is continuing to offer workshops designed to help interlibrary loan managers implement performance-improving strategies as identified by the recent ARL Performance Measures Study. Information about the workshops can be found on the ARL Web site.

The group then discussed various strategies for lending laptops to students within the library. University of Washington, NYU, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have implemented successful lending programs. The laptops have mainly been used for word processing and e-mail. Most libraries are limiting the circulation of the laptops to several hours and are asking users to sign a statement agreeing to pay for

replacement costs if the laptop is lost. The final topic under discussion—the construction of new science libraries—inspired a lively debate about the importance (or lack thereof) of shelf space in new science libraries and the definition of “digital” libraries. ARL measurements, real time reference, and needs assessment will be topics under consideration at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.

ULS Executive Committee

The ULS Executive Committee, chaired by James Estrada, met twice during Midwinter. The 2000 Annual Conference Program Committee for ULS reported on plans for the Chicago conference.

The committee is pulling together an exciting program entitled “20/20 Vision for the Future.” It will provide perspectives on the library of the future in the context of the vast changes impacting the competitive environment of higher education.

The Executive Committee also continued to craft and refine the ULS Vision and Goals statement to bring it into accord with the new ACRL Strategic Plan.—*Anne Garrison, Swarthmore College Library, agarris1@swarthmore.edu*

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A discussion about learning communities

The ULS Current Topics Discussion group, chaired by Aline Soules, and the Community and Junior College Libraries Section of ACRL, worked together to present a thoughtful and lively discussion on learning communities and their place in library instruction.

The discussion, led by Deb Gilchrist (Pierce College) and Randy Hensley (University of Hawaii), asked participants to reflect on the ways a learning community differs from traditional approaches to teaching.

Several differences were highlighted:

- shared teaching between all members of a learning community;
- support of different learning styles and differences among members of the learning community;
- appreciation for affective, as well as cognitive, learning
- responsibility of students to learn from each other;
- potential expense; and
- issues in members developing as equal partners.

With these ideas as a background, the facilitators developed the discussion around the attributes, forms, and the library's role in learning communities.

Attributes

Hensley suggested several attributes of learning communities. Learning communities include the teacher as learner, whereby the teacher facilitates the student in making connections. There was discussion about the challenges of breaking down traditional authority barriers. Collaboration and active learning are two important attributes, and each student will connect with the material, and each other, in different ways. Learning communities are student-driven, with more dynamic structures and involvement from participants shaping where the class travels with the material.

Learning communities necessitate a degree of comfort with flexibility and failure as they are experiential and experimental, and the members of the community look to find their own and each other's connections with the material. Finally, learning communities rely on critical thinking environments where multiple discipline approaches and opinions form a core of exploration.

Learning communities take many forms

Learning communities by their very nature can take many forms, including linked courses, team-taught courses, and integrated courses with merged content. Some learning communities extend beyond the classroom and incorporate outside activities or living arrangements. These forms lend themselves well to showcasing the principles of information literacy and use the natural talents of librarians as teachers and facilitators.

Gilchrist developed the discussion in terms of the attributes of libraries in learning communities. Librarians are good at building community and interdisciplinary work and so can aptly step into the role of participant learner. Our expertise lies in connecting knowledge to others' experiences and skills and we can use this to build context.

As a dynamic structure, learning communities connect student perspective to their skills and help librarians create a relationship between the information and the application of that information. Finally, librarians help bridge the virtual and the physical worlds and teach the ways technology can be used to advance the knowledge of the community.

Roles

When the facilitators opened the discussion to questions, the ensuing conversation expanded on attributes and our role, and the group helped to further define some of the issues involved in working with learning communities. For example, students are often already skilled multitaskers and have a degree of comfort with a flexible structure. Vulnerability remains an issue with many instructors however, as they seek to give up their role as the expert and open their classrooms to a different model of teaching.

Second, evaluation can be an issue, as many learning communities are ahead of institutions or accreditation organizations. In learning communities, the focus is on the outcomes, rather than process. The satisfaction of the learner is an ultimate measure of success. Student's self-assessment and group assessment are key in measuring satisfaction and understanding.

Furthermore, reflective exercises can often gauge members' connections with the course material. Learning communities must

also have good communication and structure so that all participants understand their responsibilities to themselves and the group. The structure is dynamic but the processes for learning can be articulated within that structure. Comfort with risk-taking on the part of students and instructors is one important goal.

The discussion ended by sharing individual highlights. Memorable aspects of the discussion for participants included remembering to embrace the messier aspects of learning, seeking to balance cognitive with affective learning, searching for collaboration

(*Tips . . . continued from page 290*)

establish the reference area as a place for active learning where the focus is on dialogue and interaction. Research done by Swope and Katzer more than 25 years ago revealed that 65% of users who have a question in mind said they would not ask a librarian for help.³ Roving offers a way to draw out those unasked questions.

• **Refer questions from the reference desk to the rover.** Even with an active roving service, it's important to maintain a presence at the reference desk. Librarians scheduled at the desk should try to refer patrons who need to use a public workstation to the rover. This will allow desk librarians the flexibility to work with users who may have more complex questions and steer the user to the rover, who will be in a better position to offer follow-up assistance.

• **Keep statistics.** Many reference departments report declining numbers of reference questions. This decrease may be because fewer transactions take place solely at the desk, but more users are helped at public workstations. This may be difficult to do, but look for ways for rovers to keep accurate count of the number of questions they answer. Your statistics should jump dramatically!

A final recommendation

While it's helpful to share our experiences and ideas, it may be more beneficial to move toward a codification of specific behaviors for roving.

Considerable attention has been devoted to the behavior and performance of librarians working at reference desks, as seen in guidelines prepared by ALA's Reference and User Services Association.⁴ On one level, roving

opportunities with new partners, and stressing the primacy of outcomes while we experiment and take risks.

Learning communities have a lot to teach us as we continue to develop library instruction programs for our diverse student populations. The opportunities provide for rethinking how we approach our patrons and our teaching. Dynamic learning communities offer attributes that can be adapted into libraries or programs of any size.—*Jennifer Evans, University of Washington Libraries, jrevans@u.washington.edu* ■

ing is an extension of traditional reference; working at the reference desk and roving require many of the same skills and behaviors.

Roving, however, brings to play interpersonal dynamics that can be quite different from those encountered in a reference desk setting. Further examination and discussion will help to identify standards that will increase the overall quality and consistency of roving reference.

Notes

1. Adeane Bregman and Barbara Mento, "Reference Roving at Boston College: Point of Use Assistance to Electronic Resource Users Reduces Stress," *College and Research Libraries News* 53 (November 1992): 634–35; Eileen H. Kramer, "Why Roving Reference: A Case Study in a Small Academic Library," *Reference Services Review* 24 (Fall 1996): 67–80; Jennifer Mendelsohn, "Human Help at OPAC Terminals is User Friendly: A Preliminary Study," *RQ* 34 (Winter 1994): 173–90.

2. "Roving Reference: A Human Presence for the Information Age," RUSA/MOUSS Performance Issues for Reference and Information Service Librarians Discussion Group, ALA Annual Conference, New Orleans, June 26, 1999; Martin Courtois and Maira Liriano, "Summary on Reference Roving," posted to LIBREF-L, May 18, 1999. <http://listserv.kent.edu/archives/libref-l.html> [9/29/99].

3. Mary Jane Swope and Jeffrey Katzer, "Why Don't They Ask Questions?," *RQ* 12 (Winter 1972): 161–66.

4. "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals," January 1996. <http://www.ala.org/rusa/behavior.html> [9/29/99]. ■

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